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ABSTRACT

The National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) supports the basic view of "A Nation at Risk," which calls for immediate educational reform. But NABSE is troubled by the report's neglect of the special needs of Black and poor students. "A Nation at Risk" lacks compassion for those not of the "fittest," and admonishes students to achieve more or become discards. Failing to hold teachers and administrators responsible for their own performance, the report does not realize that a teacher candidate's high test scores do not mean he or she would be sensitive to the demands of educating students of a different race or class. In summary, NABSE's position on "A Nation at Risk": (1) supports the twin goals of equity and high quality and the creation of a Learning Society; (2) approves of the New Basics (but recommends inclusion of African-American studies); (3) endorses the Federal government's primary responsibility in leading and funding reform; (4) believes that immediately raising standards for student performance would criminally compound the problem of early educational neglect of minority students; (5) supports higher salaries for teachers, but does not believe these would necessarily assure teacher commitment to educate all children; and (6) urges the establishment of a national scholarship program to attract teacher candidates who have demonstrated their ability to relate to children of diverse backgrounds. (KH)

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THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF BLACK SCHOOL EDUCATORS

A POSITION ON

"A NATION AT RISK"

For the first time in American history, the education of the nation's children and youth has become, in 1983, one of the prime political issues. All of the major announced presidential candidates have placed education in center stage of domestic concerns.

This position paper reaffirms NABSE'S commitment to its principles as stated in the following excerpt from its preamble:

> The National Alliance of Black School Educators affirms the inherent worth, dignity and educability of Black people. The Alliance challenges forces which obstruct the achievement, development, and educational opportunities of youth and adults...
>
> The National Alliance of Black School Educators will analyze and apply shared knowledge to the eradication of problems which stand as obstructions to quality education for all children and particularly Black children.

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A number of recently released reports all urge substantial reform in the education of the young. The 1982 "Paideia Report" of Mortimer Adler, and those published during 1983, the Report of the "Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Elementary and Secondary Education Policy"; the "Task Force on Education for Economic Growth Report"; the "Report to the National Science Foundation" by the National Science Boards Commission on Pre-College Education; the College Board's Academic Preparation for College"; John Goodlad's "A Place Called School"; the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's "High School: A

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Report on Secondary Education in America"; the "Report of the Congressional Task Force on Teachers' Merit Pay"; and the "Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education: A Nation at Risk" all have contributed to the National debate over the extent to which our economic and political system has been damaged by our educational shortcomings and the necessary measures of reform.

Whether one prefers to believe the ominous warnings of "A Nation at Risk" or the more optimistic analysis of "High School" that there are signs the nation has turned the corner away from educational mediocrity, there is common agreement that our schools are in trouble; business, government and the field of education, itself, are all calling for major reforms.

The National Alliance of Black School Educators shares the view of other education associations that American education must be reformed to provide quality education and equitable treatment for all children. We are especially concerned with the educational development of Black and poor children and youth. It is in the spirit of our concern for the educational welfare of poor and Black Americans that we issue this position paper. We have chosen to focus our reaction on the report which has become the most publicized and the most discussed, probably the most influential of the current documents on educational reform: "A Nation at Risk."

"A Nation at Risk" warns: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." We have, according to the report, committed "an unthinking act of unilateral educational disarmament." "A rising tide of mediocrity threatens the very future of our nation." We recognize that we're entering the "information age" and learning is the indispensable investment required for success. Knowledge, learning, information and skilled intelligence are replacing products and natural resources as the "raw materials" of an international commerce.

We are struck at once by the tough military tone and by the lack of compassion for those not of the "fittest," which permeates the report.

Early in the document, the Commission states its intent not to find "scapegoats" and certainly not to blame the "beleagured" teachers for the declining quality of education; however, near the conclusion of the report, it becomes clear that there is a scapegoat to be blamed. Students are told that they will "forfeit" their chances to be productive members of this society and will become "disenfranchised," if they do not acquire the skills, knowledge, and habits necessary to the operation of the nation's industrial and military complexes. This hortatory message places the burden upon students and their parents--the least powerful members

of the schooling cast of characters. Students and their parents could become the targets. Those who do not measure up could lose their chance. The economic, social, and political climate should issue forth signals that successful achievement in school will indeed reduce inequalities and lead to a more satisfying life. Instead, students are admonished to achieve more or become discards. The report seems to avoid holding teachers and administrators accountable for their own performances. On the contrary, the report implies that if "persons preparing to teach... [are] "required to meet high educational standards...demonstrate an aptitude for teaching and...demonstrate a competence in an academic discipline," then the teacher's capability to teach would be assured. Failure to learn would be attributed to other factors, such as students withholding "their best efforts in learning."

"A Nation at Risk" implies that excellence in teaching can be predicted or determined by high test scores. Excellent teaching is far more complex than the report seems to suggest. The excellent teacher for poor Black children requires different and far more assets than the ability to make a passing and above test score. Many of NABSE's members have been taught by excellent Black teachers. Each of us can surely invoke memories and personal images of the teachers who deeply influenced our total development. Our best teachers were those who gave us opportunities to discover our undisclosed latent possibilities

that we could do things that were difficult, tedious and risky, yet rewarding and satisfying. There were also brilliant teachers who were inspiring models displaying stamina, generosity, intellectual curiosity, personal dignity and a sense of joy and humor. We are also aware of teachers whose academic preparation might be judged as superior but who rejected children of certain racial or religious backgrounds or economic circumstances. "A Nation at Risk" does not recognize the existence of teachers who don't like poor or minority children and, therefore, fail to teach them, of administrators who, like some teachers, have low expectations for non-white children and fail to set curricular goals commensurate with what normal children should be expected to learn.

NABSE does believe that students must assume responsibility for their learning and that interested, informed parents can support the students' and schools' efforts. But we also believe that teachers, administrators, school boards, local, state, and national officials must be held accountable for their responsibility. None should become scapegoats but all must be accountable.

Though "A Nation at Risk," like many of the other reports cited earlier, virtually ignores the existence of minority children, who not incidentally are the majority school population in fourteen of the nation's sixteen largest cities, the report is not without merit. Accordingly, the National

Alliance of Black School Educators is able to support [illegible] of its recommendations, albeit with some reservations.

POSITION STATEMENTS

1. We strongly support the report's claim that the twin goals of equity and high quality can and must be maintained. We also support the goal of creating a Learning Society which would foster an environment of lifelong learning, one in which citizens would take pride in developing and utilizing their skills maximally, where the entire environment would be a source of knowledge.
2. We approve of the New Basics; however, we strongly recommend the inclusion of African-American History in the social studies sequence; African-American literature in the English content; and African-American art, music and dance as part of the fine and performing arts courses.
3. We are most emphatic in our endorsement of the report's recommendations that the Federal Government has primary responsibility both to provide leadership for educational reform and to support and fund the required changes.
4. While our membership supports high expectations and high standards for student performance, we believe the immediate adoption of higher standards of student performance and for student admissions to higher education will

be disastrous for that segment of our population whose early education has been woefully neglected. Increased standards without time and funds for the disadvantaged to catch up would criminally compound the problem of early educational neglect.

5. We support higher salaries for all teachers and other educational personnel; yet, we do not believe higher salaries will assure teacher commitment to educate all children.

6. We urge that a national scholarship program be established to attract high quality teacher candidates, who have demonstrated their ability to relate to children of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

We are distressed that President Reagan has rejected his Commission's recommendations on Federal leadership in advancing reforms and in financing the changes urged. Of even greater concern is the manner in which President Reagan and Secretary of Education Bell have distorted the report's findings to suggest that the decline of American education is due largely to the government's having provided too much leadership in promoting the interests of special groups: racial minorities, women and the handicapped. This is ironic in view of the fact that the report, itself, gives little attention to these groups.

Perhaps the real value of "A Nation at Risk" is that it has sounded the alarm, warning us of impending disaster but hopeful that we Americans have the will and the know how to respond to the challenge. The national debate has begun. The National Alliance of Black School Educators will be a continuing contributor, supporting those policies and programs that we believe are good for all students, advocating the special concerns of Black and other minority and poor students and opposing those policies and programs which we believe to be elitist, exclusionary and not in the best interest of the masses of American students.

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